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Soap Opera Exposes Brazil's Dark Past

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The struggle against impunity and uncovering the truth about what happened during the 21 years of Brazil's 1964-1985 civilian-military dictatorship have received an unexpected boost after a half century of redemocratization in which all civilian governments and the major press concealed the issue of human rights. The new climate brought about by President Dilma Rousseff's decision to support the creation of a truth commission (Comissão da Verdade) to investigate—but not judge—that period of recent history has given way to a series of initiatives arising from within society that go beyond the search for the truth about political repression.

Alongside the daily broadcast of a very realistic soap opera, which takes place during the dictatorship, is the demand for justice by relatives of the 122 victims of the indiscriminate police repression unleashed in May 2006 in the state of São Paulo in reprisal for a fierce offensive by drug-trafficking groups (NotiSur, May 26, 2006) and the publication of a joint investigation by the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Justiça Global and the International Human Rights Clinic (IHRC), part of the Human Rights Program at the Harvard Law School, regarding those events.

The first Brazilian soap opera (Amor e Revolução) set during the dictatorship—from its origins to the overthrow of constitutional President João Goulart (1961-1964) and the events that followed—premiered on April 5. It is broadcast at 10 pm central time. Even its first episode had a powerful impact by denouncing US involvement in planning and executing the coup that swept away Brazilian democracy and by showing the shooting of a group of students demonstrating in the streets of Rio de Janeiro, the former capital of the country.

Reactions were immediate. The military published a document demanding that the government ban future broadcasts of Amor e Revolução.

Minister of Human Rights Maria do Rosário Nunes said, "The soap opera will serve to demystify an issue that has been absent from Brazilians' political agenda and that should be debated by the public." The minister, one of the many women named by the president to give her Cabinet the highest female representation in Brazil's history (nine of the 37 ministers), added, "Although I don't know the general leaning of the soap opera, after seeing its beginnings, I believe it will make an important contribution to learning the truth."

President Rousseff prioritizes human rights

The series' premier occurred as Dilma, as she is known in Brazil, made human rights one of the central tenets of her four-year mandate. The same day that the first episode of Amor e Revolução aired, the legislature approved ratification of the International Convention for the Protection of all People from Enforced Disappearance, after laying dormant in the Congress since 1994.

an interest in investigating or much less bringing to justice the military and police who violated human rights.

For many analysts, most surprising was Lula’s lack of interest, given that he was a former laborer who as a union leader suffered repression during the dictatorship and, along with thousands who suffered political persecution, founded and gave life to the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT), which brought him and Dilma to the presidency in the South American giant.

Although Lula proposed creating a truth commission in mid-2010, his proposal was limited to strictly investigative functions. In addition, he never pushed for its approval in Congress.

Nor did Lula ever instruct his comfortable legislative majority to approve a law to limit the acute media concentration, which today is in the hands of two groups that dominate radio, TV, and print media (in all its forms—newspapers, magazines, news agencies, public-opinion consulting firms, newsprint factories).

Both the law creating the truth commission and the one aimed at regulating media companies were long-standing PT demands that Lula left for his successor.

"These things explain why, after eight years, Lula ended his two terms with an 85% approval rating; no major interest group opposed him because he did not affect any major interest group," said Déborah Maria da Silva, as if reading his epitaph. Da Silva is the coordinator of the group Mães de Maio, made up of relatives of victims of the police repression in 2006, early in Lula's second term.

Amor e Revolução is a production of SBT, a private TV channel with high penetration in poorer sectors of Brazilian society, precisely those that have had less access to information regarding what happened during the dictatorship. The soap opera begins in the 1960s, before the coup, and concludes in the 1970s, when military commandos massacred a rebel group in Araguaia, in the Amazônia region.

Laura Petit da Silva, an activist with the Comissão de Familiares de Mortos e Desaparecidos Políticos (CFMDP), felt consoled after seeing the first episodes of the series. "It's been 47 years since the coup; I hope that with projects such as this we'll become aware of what happened in those years."

Politicians tell their story

Each Amor e Revolução episode closes with the testimony of a political leader, such as Valdir Pires or former PT president José Dirceu, both ministers during Lula's administration. The military refused to make statements. The only members of the dictatorship who spoke were former minister Jarbas Passarinho and former Maj. Sebastião Curió. Thiago Santiago, the soap opera's creator, said he hopes that, for the last episode, President Rousseff, who was a political prisoner during the dictatorship, will give the testimony.

"The series has been incalculably valuable for us," said Petit da Silva. She said that Brazil's dictatorship, despite being one of the longest lasting in South America, has until now been absent from public debate. And that is not all. No military personnel have been tried or imprisoned, unlike in Argentina; no memorial exists listing the crimes of those years; and, in the major cities such as São Paulo and Brasilia, avenues honor the dictators. Such is the case of Umberto Castelo Branco (1964-1967) and Emilio de Garrastazú (1969-1974), under whose regime Rousseff was imprisoned.
In contrast with the other South American countries, where the de facto governments are called by their proper name—dictatorships—leading Brazilian media identify them, even today, simply as "military governments," and the generals who subjugated the country are referred to merely as "ex-presidents."

It is a strange phenomenon in a country in which four of the last constitutional presidents were victims of the dictatorship: Goulart was assassinated in 1976 in Argentina as part of Operation Condor, the coordinated repression by South American dictatorships; Cardoso had to go into exile; Lula was detained for his union activities; and Rousseff was tortured and jailed.

This is the TV soap opera that calls events by their proper names: the de factor regime is called a dictatorship and the foreign country that promoted the coup is described as interventionist.

The TV series' approximation to historical truth irritated the military, who consider impunity their natural right. A week after the first Amor e Revolução episode was broadcast, 537 officers of various branches of the military signed a public communiqué in which they asked, "What is the soap opera's purpose?" And they answered, "It is obvious that the government, through the recently created Comissão da Verdade, has created interests and has an interest in the business."

They are mistaken. The commission, which is only authorized to investigate, not judge, human rights violations, is still a proposal waiting to be debated in Congress; it has not yet been created.

The communiqué ended by asking authorities (without specifying which ones) to take "measures" regarding the program; that is, to censure it, to take it off the air.

A month after the first episode of Amor e Revolução aired, the Mães de Maio released the report of the joint investigation with Justiça Global and the Harvard experts titled, "São Paulo sob Achaque: Corrupção, Crime Organizado e Violência Institucional em Maio de 2006," which denounced the corruption that made possible the massacre of defenseless civilians. The groups announced that they would take the matter to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR) of the Organization of American States (OAS) to call for condemnation of the state of São Paulo and Brazil.

"Someone has to be held accountable. A massacre was committed; the police chose the outskirts of the city to commit its crimes against innocent people, just to tell drug traffickers that they controlled the city," said da Silva, whose son was murdered by the police in the suburbs of the São Paulo port of Santos.

Since President Rousseff took office and Amor e Revolução began to be broadcast, society has begun to take notice.

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